Providing a ‘broad and balanced’ music education in school: a clarification for school and strategic leaders

Kevin Rogers
Music is a wonderfully diverse subject – inevitably so, since it is creative, practical and best learned through a direct engagement with a vast range of sounds and many different sound worlds (which means that you don’t just learn about music: you also learn through music and by making music).

For leaders who are either interested in or directly responsible for improving musical provision, this diverse nature of music as a subject is made even more complex by the range of activities and opportunities that make up a fully ‘broad and balanced’ music education. There are so many possibilities that it is not always easy to be clear about their separate purposes and functions – and especially about the primary learning focus that each requires. This document therefore aims to clarify how the different parts of a ‘broad and balanced’ music education fit together, covering both their separate identities and their integration into a balanced whole. It has been produced now to offer a set of principles against which school and strategic leaders can judge the validity and value of current education initiatives; over time, leaders might also use it as an audit of their own settings’ provision.

In its simplest form, school-based music education consists of three major areas:

- **Curriculum music** (i.e. classroom music: EYFS / National Curriculum lessons or KS4 classes)
- **Instrumental / vocal learning and music ensembles or groups** requiring regular membership
- **Musical events and opportunities** (concerts, workshops, festivals etc.)

It can be helpful to see these separate areas and their inter-relationship visually, as it provides a clear model of how a ‘broad and balanced’ music education within schools can be constructed.

Three key points to remember

1. **Curriculum music** (regular, classroom music lessons) is the only part of music education which all pupils are statutorily entitled to. It is the bed-rock of a ‘broad and balanced’ music education and effective provision for curriculum music is essential if music is to flourish in a school.

2. At the same time, all three areas depend on each other: if one area loses effectiveness, it will inevitably reduce the impact of another area and pupils’ overall music education will suffer.

3. **Informal musical learning** (pupils’ own listening, participation in group or community music making etc.) will weave around and through all of this, we need to be constantly aware of how to support it and build on it across all other provision.

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Defining the key character and purpose for each of the three main areas of music education*

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<th>Curriculum music</th>
<th>Instrumental learning &amp; ensemble membership</th>
<th>Musical events &amp; opportunities</th>
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| **Primary learning & purpose**  
It is essential to recognise that the best way of developing musical understanding is through practical, creative exploration. Pupils have therefore developed their understanding by investigating practically a range of ways of making music (drawing on examples from across time and place). By doing this, pupils will also be:  
• learning how to compose their own music, and how to recreate the music of others through arranging, improvising and performing.  
• building their knowledge of the ways that music is performed (by soloists and/or ensembles), the skills include:  
  • sight reading of different parts of music  
  • developing strong analytical and evaluative listening skills to identify, select and appraise both their own music and the music of others.  
| **Process & specific areas of learning**  
It takes years of dedicated, individual effort to achieve high standards. **Gradual practice** is essential and requires no practice by music educators who have real expertise on different sorts of music. When pupils work together in an ensemble, they will learn how to both take a lead and respond to the different styles of music; understanding of different genres or cultures makes a positive difference to the music educators’ learning:  
• about the effectiveness of sustained and long periods of musical engagement – the process of being part of an ensemble provides a unique opportunity, leading to a performance for parents, provides a focus of musical engagement and performance.  
| **Curriculum music**  
Curriculum music is about helping all pupils to learn how to develop their musicality; it is not about helping some pupils to become entry-level professional musicians. We therefore need to be absolutely clear that curriculum music is not primarily about learning to play a musical instrument.  
| **Key features**  
Creative exploration is essential within curriculum music: it is one of the most distinctive features that mark it out as different from other aspects of music education. Creative music making should also be constantly informed by the contexts within which it exists, whether single (the storytelling behind an instrument) or quite sophisticated (teaching music for others reflecting brands or social allegiances).  
| **Berein mind**  
Learning an instrument is a critical part of a broad and balanced music education and the opportunity to do so must be offered to all pupils but creative music is for quite different, broader and more creative forms of musical learning.  
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| **Intrumental learning & ensemble membership**  
To help pupils learn how to play an instrument / how to sing at an advanced level, so that they can play music on their own and / or with others.  
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| **Musical events & opportunities**  
To help pupils learn about the joy and power of musical engagement and performance.  
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*While many features will appear across all three areas, these tables emphasise the primary focus of each area.

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There is a long-held view amongst music education experts that curriculum music is the foundation of an effective music education: it is the most significant of the three main areas (curriculum or classroom music; instrumental learning / ensembles; and music making events / opportunities). We should also recognise that curriculum music is for all pupils, and for all of EYFS / Key Stages 1–3. This makes it unique: curriculum music is a sustained, long-term and regular form of learning for all pupils, but each of the other aspects of music education have at least some element of option within them.

We need to recognise that the major areas of a ‘broad and balanced’ music education must inform each other – they are not completely isolated aspects of learning. While the mechanics for developing this interplay across the major areas are many and varied, teachers and managers do need to plan for them to happen, e.g. using classroom understanding of dance music to inform a violinist’s waltz performance; or getting pupils to use their saxophone playing skills to inform and improve their understanding of blues in the classroom.

Music education is multi-faceted. An effective, ‘broad and balanced’ provision will offer:

- **Curriculum music**
  Its focus is on understanding music, creative exploration of musical ideas, and developing strong evaluative skills informed by contextual awareness.

- **Instrumental learning and ensemble membership**
  The focus here is on the development of specific playing and aural skills, as well as understanding how to contribute to a team and how to develop a shared, group identity.

- **Additional events and opportunities**
  The learning is here about the power of music to inspire and motivate individuals and whole communities, as well as learning about the intense processes required to access the highest possible musical outcomes across a range of types of music.

Although each of these areas has a unique form of musical learning as its main focus, the interplay between the different components is critical and must be deliberately planned for.

Kevin Rogers

Kevin Rogers has wide experience of music education in England. Having taught secondary music (including as an 11-18 comprehensive head of music) he moved into advisory support, providing CPD for all aspects of music education and all age ranges. He was County Inspector with Hampshire County Council’s Music Service from 1999 – 2018. During this time, he was seconded to the Secondary National Strategy to lead on its KS3 music programme, and the subsequent development of the Strategy’s KS3 music web site. He also worked with QCA on two national assessment projects involving music at KS3.

Although most of his work therefore focused on class teaching in schools, Kevin also supported instrumental / vocal teachers in projects exploring progression, transition and the nature of musical learning in small group tuition. Though now officially retired, he continues to influence and campaign for music education through the ISM’s Council.

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The Incorporated Society of Musicians (ISM) is the UK’s professional body for musicians and a nationally recognised subject association for music. Founded in 1882, we are dedicated to promoting the importance of music, defending the rights of those working in the music profession and protecting music education.

We support nearly 9,500 members working in all areas of music from classroom music teachers, peripatetic instrumental/singing teachers and private music teachers to performers, composers and administrators. We are a financially independent not-for-profit organisation with no political affiliation.

If you would like to make a donation to support the work of the ISM Trust, please visit ismtrust.org

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The Incorporated Society of Musicians Trust (ISM Trust), the ISM’s sister charity, was created in 2014 to advance education, the arts and to promote health. Our primary focus is to deliver high quality professional development by leading practitioners from the ISM and also in partnership with other organisations.

We are dedicated to creating pioneering resources to support music and all those who work in the sector including music educators, performers and composers. It also delivers work through webinars, regional seminars, training events and advice packs.

If you would like to find out more about the ISM or join us as a member, please visit ism.org

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